



Department of Sociology

TO: Joseph A. Bugni, Associate Federal Defender

FROM: Michael Kimmel
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RE: Samy Hamzeh

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I have read the transcripts of various conversations among young men identified as [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] and Samy Hamzeh¹.

Over the past 35 years of my career, I have studied the dynamics of male groups, and explored various dynamics of masculinity. I am currently Distinguished University Professor of Sociology and Gender Studies at Stony Brook University, and the founder and Executive Director of the Center for the Study of Men and Masculinities there. I am the founding editor of the scholarly journal *Men and Masculinities*.

I have particularly explored the dynamics of masculinity among younger men and boys. In general, the conversations among these young men under consideration here resemble most man other settings where men hang out and bond with each other. All-male groups, such as military units, collegiate fraternities, sports teams and even close friendship groups often exhibit similar sorts of characteristics.

In addition, I have served as an expert witness for the Civil Rights division of the U. S. Department of Justice in the litigation about the Virginian Military Institute and The Citadel (1993-1996), eventually decided by the United States Supreme Court. In that context, the Justice Department relied on my expertise on the dynamics of all-male groups and the solidarity and hierarchies that develop in such groups.

I have examined these sorts of groups, and the types of conversations that they have, in my book *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*, published originally in 2008 and republished in 2018 in a new edition. Based on interviews with more than 400 young men, *Guyland* was hailed as the definitive work on young men, aged 16-26.

¹ Transcripts on the following dates: 10/13/2015, 10/15/2015, 11/02/2015, 11/06/2015, 11/12/2015, 11/19/2015, 11/23/2015, 12/7/2015, 12/14/2015, and 1/19/2015 – 01-25/2015



In that book I described the homosocial world of young men, how they seek to establish their masculinity in the eyes of others, often by risk-taking, to "prove" themselves. Homosocial bonding through conversation usually creates hierarchies of risk taking, bravado and boastfulness. Boasting is a form of bonding. Specifically, I found how important "gender policing" is among men, how young men "police" the gender appropriateness of the actions and attitudes of other men. Posturing and posing for the approval of other men is the centerpiece of masculinity.

In my subsequent book, *Angry White Men: Masculinity at the End of an Era* (2013), I interviewed a range of "angry white men" – from men's rights activists and fathers' rights groups to white nationalists, neo-Nazi skinheads and white supremacists. Based on about 100 interviews across a spectrum of areas, I discovered that all these groups of young angry men experienced what I call "aggrieved entitlement" – a sense that something has been taken from them, something they "deserved" and has been given to others who are less deserving. Thus they are both entitled to the rewards they expected but aggrieved because they did not get them.

For my most recent book, *Healing from Hate: How Young Men Get Into- and out of – Violent Extremism* (2018), I interviewed another 100 men who have successfully exited from extremists groups. I described with ways that young men get into, and out of, these extremist politics. After detailing the dynamics of entry – how the men are recruited into violent extremism - I focused on four organizations that help men get out of violent extremist movements in four different countries. I focused on ex-neo-Nazis and white supremacists in Sweden, German and the United States, and also former jihadists in London. In Sweden and Germany, I worked with EXIT, and in the U.S. I worked with Life After Hate. And in London, I worked with Quilliam Foundation. Each of these organizations are organized and staffed by "formers," men who have been radicalized into extremist groups, and have found their way out, and now seek to help other men to get out. Through Quilliam, I interviewed several former jihadists in London about their recruitment, experiences, and the strategies they used to get out of the movement.

These three books, as well as several scholarly articles, provide the academic foundation of my assessment of the transcripts of conversations among Hamzeh, [REDACTED] and one or two others who appear occasionally.

There are two possible ways one can read the transcripts: (1) as the preparations of a terrorist, planning with others, to commit an act of terrorism; or (2) the banter of a group of guys, fantasizing, boasting and building camaraderie among the members of the group. In my opinion, the transcript reads more like the dynamics of banter among a group of friends than an actual terrorist plot. More importantly, the transcripts often read like Samy Hamzeh *himself* believes it to be guy talk. By the end of the transcripts, when the talk turns more serious, Samy Hamzeh, the identified suspect, seeks to withdraw from the group by finding an alternate justification for resisting the group norms. It seems clear to me that for Hamzeh, at least, this was more banter than plot.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONFORMITY AMONG YOUNG MEN

One of the key components of male bonding is conformity. There are norms of masculinity to which all members are assumed to subscribe; failure to subscribe to them can result in social exclusion. The drive for conformity is not specific to men, of course -- as the early social psychology experiments by Solomon Asch demonstrated. In his classic experiments, subjects were shown cards with three lines and asked to identify the line that was shortest and longest. It was an easy task, and subjects invariably got it right when they were asked individually, or even in a group when they answered first. But when others in the group picked a different line, and declared it the longest, the subject of the experiment became confused and agitated and eventually changed his or her mind, and "saw" the wrong line as the correct answer. Thus it was demonstrated that exerting enough social pressure could change a person's perceptions of reality. It was argued by the experimenters that the subjects actually *did* change their perceptions, and didn't simply go along because it was "easier."

These experiments are the foundation of much of the research on peer pressure, which is at its peak in age cohorts, like adolescents and young men, that are attempting to establish their identities and their place in the group's hierarchy. Asch's original research has been replicated many times, and it remains the touchstone experiment on group processes.

In *Guyland*, I found this pressure to be particularly salient among young men. The drive to "fit in" is especially powerful, and young men will take all sorts of risks – in driving, drinking, ritual limit testing – to prove that they are "real men," and that they belong.

In the transcripts, there are many instances of each of the conversants attempting to establish their position in the hierarchy, their membership in the group, the conformity that is perceived to be the glue of the group. These dynamics are present in most all-male groups, from informal friendship networks to more formal institutional groups like sports teams, military units, and collegiate fraternities.

MALE BONDING

Perhaps the central dynamics in male friendships is the bonding that takes place through shared activities and conversation. That bonding, solidarity and camaraderie is established through mutually agreed-upon hierarchies.

There is also a sizable literature on the significance of male bonding in men's lives. Whether in studies of sports teams, the military, collegiate fraternities, there are studies of rituals of initiation that establish membership in the group, and the significance of male bonding both for group solidarity and individual identity.

The transcripts are filled with harmless banter, designed to create strong group feelings and cement group norms. Hamzeh spends most of the time in these transcripts hanging out with other guys he thought were his friends and confidants. As is typical of male banter

they all spend time boasting, seeking to outdo each other. For example, on 1/24/16 they pray, go to Taco Bell, talk about sex, and their mothers' cooking.² There is a lot of banter also about shooting guns, very much the way that other groups of guys talk about sex. On 11/02/15, Hamzeh confesses he doesn't know how to shoot a gun, which is analogous to saying he's a virgin.³

There is a constant play of who is in the group – for example, whether Mo can be trusted – and discussion like these are often a way to cement the bonds among the others. Notice how they constantly question the others' loyalty to the group, whether Mo or someone else is not really one of them.

Male bonding is thus emotionally ambiguous: “you’re either in or you’re out” distinctions made by peer disciplining can produce a variety of emotions like shame, fear, and hurt alongside friendship, intimacy, and bonding.

In the beginning of the transcripts, Hamzeh talks about how he wants to go to Gaza and perform jihad. He insists that he wants to go “there” but does not want to do anything “here.” In fact, as he says, “that was all talk”.⁴ While others try to persuade him, Hamzeh says he can’t go now because his mother is ill. Hamzeh says that his mother has had a heart attack. Both his parents ask him to stay at home.

MALE BONDING AS COMPETITIVE AND HIERARCHICAL

Bonding takes places largely through creating horizontal bonds of solidarity and vertical lines of authority. Much of male bonding is what researchers call “dominance bonding”

Dominance bonding is defined by Katherine Farr as a “process of collective alliance through which the group and its members affirm and reaffirm their superiority.” Dominance bonding is the glue that holds the powerful together.

“The striving to do gender appropriately within the constraints of the fraternal bond involves talk that manages to put down women while also ridiculing or teasing one another.” (Curry, 131.)

Sociologist Mike Messner argued that dominance bonding becomes the way that men often experience emotional connection with each other based on a shared sense of superiority, conferred by sexism or homophobia. Men reaffirm their masculinity through such bonding.

Another study found that in such groups “the male group bond consisted almost entirely of aggressive words” (Lyman, in ML 161). An example of this is the constant homophobia that permeates their conversations. In the transcripts, they use the word “faggot” about 40 times, mostly by [REDACTED], but by all of them. It’s possible that [REDACTED] is using the

² Translation_DD95_PT2_01-24-2016_000026-27

³ Translation_DD22_11-02-2015_000045

⁴ Translation_DD11_10-13-2015_000031

word most often to establish his dominance in the group, and trying to get Hamzeh to follow along.

It is clear from the dynamics presented in the transcripts that [REDACTED] is at the top of the hierarchy: he directs the flow of the conversation, and does the most “gender policing” – by which I mean that he is the one who questions the others’ masculinity by calling them “faggot.” He is also the only one with a gun, which also enhances his status. In that hierarchy, everyone else is a “wannabe,” trying to both prove their masculinity to the “top dog” and also cement their position in the hierarchy of manhood.

There is an extensive literature on the importance of the intensity of this competitive and hierarchical world of male bonding. Anthropological research on initiation, hazing, and their importance in men’s identities is well-developed in the social sciences, for example David Gilmore’s *Manhood in the Making* (1991) and Thomas Gregor’s research on cross-cultural initiation rituals (1982).

In my research for *Guyland*, I found that homophobia – the fear that others will think you are or might be gay – is a prime motivator for young men to take all sorts of risks to prove they are not gay. “That’s so gay” is among the most common put-downs among young men in middle school, high school and beyond. This constant homophobic element is especially present in all-male groups, such as the military, fraternities, and sports teams. “That which is under suspicion of being at odds with traditional definitions of masculinity threatens the bond and will be questioned.” (Curry. 130)

Homophobia is often the glue that holds men’s groups together, sharing solidarity and creating community through dominance over gay men as well as women (perceived femininity). The fear of being perceived as weak, as insecure, as emotional, as afraid – these are often the fears that lead to men’s risk taking.

It often involves one-upping each other. “Underlying these interactions is an ever present sense of competition, both for status and position on the team itself and between the team and its opponents.” (Curry, p. 123).

Curry systematically analyzed conversations among athletes in a locker room setting, literally “locker room talk.” Among young men, disengagement is often a mechanism for establishing one’s position in the hierarchy. For example, how little one cares about school – academic disengagement – is often perceived as a sign of masculinity, while caring about school is reserved for “wimps” and “nerds.”

Similarly, sociologist C. J. Pascoe’s ethnography of a public high school in California, *Dude, You’re a Fag* (2007) examined the dynamics of adolescent masculinity and how the hierarchies center around homophobic banter.

In an experiment I conducted with a graduate student, researchers coded three types of pornography for their levels of violence towards women. As expected, magazines were less violent than videos, which were, themselves, less violent than Internet chat rooms. Why,

we asked, were the Internet chat rooms far more violent than the magazines or videos? Our findings were that the internet chat rooms were a homosocial space of male dominance bonding through competitive interactions among the men, and when one would say what he did with a partner, some other man would establish his place in the hierarchy by either agreeing or trying to go one better. Pretty soon the conversation got more graphic, more vulgar, and more violent.

And what is true in the arena of male conversations about sex is equally true in many other arenas: athletic prowess, strength and power, military exploits, and other areas. This is also well documented in social science literature (Messner, 2007; Nelson, 1995).

OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY

In another classic social psychology experiment, Stanley Milgram (1963, 1974) tested the limits of the ability to pull away from the group. In his now famous experiments, he found that a majority of subjects were willing to administer significant electric shocks to the “learners” in the experiment. They did so because they were told to do so by an “authority,” meaning the lab technician or experimenter. It was clear that subjects wanted to resist, but felt that the authority of the technician gave them a moral absolution from any consequences for their actions.

One can see this in the ways that Hamzeh ultimately needs “reinforcements” – two imams – to declare that he does not want to go through with any sort of attack. It took great strength to be able to say that; he did not go along with it, but in fact resisted the pull of the group, and their claims to higher, theological, authority.

This is more than the simple “god willing” that punctuates their conversations.

In fact, the young men rarely talk about theology, ideology, or politics. There’s vague talk about jihad, or some references to how the Masons control so much. There’s some imaginative misinformation, that, for example, the Masons like to eat the hearts of Muslims and they are actually ISIS.⁵ This suggests that the banter is, in some ways, apolitical. The conversations are interpersonal, not political. They don’t talk politics, they don’t talk religion. And when they actually do have real religious or political conversations, as when Hamzeh speaks to two imams, he listens. He repeatedly says he wants nothing to do with Hamas. Hamzeh introduces a different, alternative hierarchy (religious) for the hierarchy developing among the guys.

Though Hamzeh has a lot of energy for jihad and talks constantly about it, it is always someone else who seems to initiate the plan, whether it’s killing Masons or robbing a diamond store. For example, Hamzeh states on January 19, 2016, it was [REDACTED] that proposed the Masons.⁶

⁵ Translation_DD84_PT3-4_01-22-2016_000064

⁶ Translation_DD73_PT10-11_01-19-2016_000091

In fact, Hamzeh seems to understand that this sort of banter is exactly the vehicle for male bonding – and noting more. Twice he refers to “this type of talk” knowing it is not serious; once on January 19, 2016,⁷ he explicitly says “I’m joking” on January 22, 2019.⁸

RESISTANCE AND NON-CONFORMITY

The dynamics of bonding in all-male friendship groups create a uniformity of thought and a constant provocation to take greater and greater risks. It is, therefore, quite surprising - and ultimately revealing that Hamzeh eventually resists the peer pressure and risks social exclusion by deciding he does not want to participate in a terrorist act in the United States.

In order to make his case, he breaks every norm I have enumerated:

- He breaks the unanimity and consensus within the group, risking exclusion;
- He reports to a different authority; in fact, he consults two imams and his father, all of who advise against it, which provides Hamzeh with the alternate a justification that he needs to resist.
- He withstands homophobic taunts of being a faggot and chicken because he does not want to go through with it.
- He insists that he only wants to acquire a weapon for self-defense, and wants to acquire only a handgun.
- He admits to being afraid, thus breaking the masculine norm of never showing weakness nor fear. p. 19: “I could have gone a long time ago. I am afraid to go and get arrested. That’s what I’m afraid of; I don’t want to be arrested.”⁹

What seems clear from the transcripts, then, is that the police informants, fearing that they are going to “lose” their prey as he resists their peer pressure, eventually concoct a scheme to get him to carry the weapons and be caught with them. At that stage, in my opinion, his association with the weapons was only because they all asked him to do it, and by then he had already extricated himself from the plan. His motivation was about going along with the group, wanted to please the others, wanting to prove he wasn’t weak.

As the plan begins to unravel, Hamzeh has second thoughts,¹⁰ and agrees to keep the weapons “just in case” perhaps to guard a mosque.¹¹ He clearly accepts the need for the

⁷ Translation_DD74_PT2_01-19-2016_000055

⁸ Translation_DD84_PT3-4_01-22-2016_000029

⁹ Translation_DD45_PT3_12-07-2015_000020

weapons but he is not at all accepting of the idea of jihad in the United States.¹² For Hamzeh, his conversations were about sustaining the group, maintaining his membership in it, and proving himself. He clearly knows the difference between the fantasy violence of video games or action movies, and the reality of real violence. Talking big and boastfully is quite different from actually following through on that braggadocio.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would say that it is a good thing police informants are not sitting in when guys sit around shooting the breeze in locker rooms and frat houses and firehouses and police stations all across the country. Just as it's hard to tell if any of Hamzeh's statements are serious or banter, it would be hard to tell if the guys' conversations posed a serious threat or were simply, as the saying goes "locker room talk."

As I read these transcripts, it is my opinion that they represent the dynamics of male bonding through boastful banter, preening and posturing in a comradely hierarchy, and not the strategic planning by a terrorist cell.

¹⁰ Translation_DD97_01-24-2016_000009

¹¹ Translation_DD97_01-24-2016_000013

¹² Translation_DD97_01-24-2016_000024

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